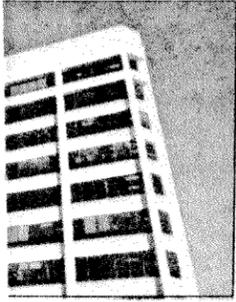


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Dick Rinker of the Tribune staff

Terri Mlsna says the response has been heartwarming.

Deceased not just a number anymore

By **RICHARD MIAL**
Of the Tribune staff

Ed Decker will get his name on a gravestone — and so may hundreds of anonymous souls who are buried with him at La Crosse County's Hillview Cemetery.

Decker, 54, who lived at a group home at 1406 Fifth Ave. S., died of a heart attack Jan. 28 and was buried in Hillview Cemetery, the burial ground for those without funds.

But, as has been the county's custom, Decker's grave was to be marked not with his name but a number — 654.

Thanks to the efforts of Terri Mlsna, a 24-year-old waitress at Fayze's restaurant and pool hall downtown, Decker will get his own personalized marker.

An interview with Mlsna in Sunday's La Crosse Tribune

It's a community project. I'm just glad to be a part of it.'

—Doug Frederick

prompted Doug Frederick, owner of La Crosse Monument Co., to donate a marker for Decker's grave.

In fact, Frederick volunteered to put names on all the other markers, provided the county brings the markers to Frederick's business on Hwy. 16 just north of La Crosse Street.

He said he made the offer to Hillview administrator James

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■ Marker gives name instead of number

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Ertz, who agreed to take it up March 6 at the next meeting of the County Institution Trustees.

"I think it's an excellent idea," Ertz said.

All the numbered markers are upright, requiring county maintenance workers to mow around them, Ertz said. Sometime this spring he said he wants to remove all 654 numbered markers and lay them flat against the ground, making it easier to mow.

When Frederick called Ertz to make the offer of Decker's gravestone, they discussed the cemetery in general. And after Ertz

told Frederick of the plans to lay the markers flat, Frederick offered to chisel the names on the markers free of charge.

"It's a community project," Frederick said of his efforts. "I'm just glad to be a part of it."

Hillview has been in existence for more than 100 years, Ertz said, starting out as La Crosse County's "poor farm." In the early years, several infants were buried at Hillview, and many of those have only numbered markers. County officials allow families to install additional markers with names and other personal information. But most of the time

the families do not have the money or interest.

While Decker had no job and spent most of his time roaming the streets looking for money, there were a number of people who had gotten to know him and liked him.

Shelley Gentry, Decker's social worker, said many people knew him — including many police officers. She said one of the officers who responded to the ambulance call at the group home said, "Hey, that's Eddie, who picks up money."

Mlsna said she was delighted at the response to the article.

"There's just been so many

people talking to me about it," she said.

Meanwhile, she's received two donations — of \$5 each. One came to her in care of the Tribune.

It was from a Blair man who had read the original story.

In an accompanying note he wrote: "I would like to help Terri Mlsna with her wish to have Mr. Decker's name on his tombstone. I may end up the same as he, who knows?"

And of the traditional numbered gravestones, he wrote, "Let's change the system."

Thanks to Mlsna and Frederick — and possibly the county as well — his wish may come true.